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NASA Procedural Requirements

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Chapter 2: NASA Writing Standards

2.1 Organized Writing

Format is important, but clarity is more important. The following techniques and guidelines can help make your writing more organized, natural, and concise.

2.1.1 Follow the newspaper format. Open with the most important information and decrease to the least important. Avoid mere chronology.

2.1.2 Start fast, explain as necessary, then stop. When writing correspondence, think about the one key sentence that expresses the main idea. Do not waste the opening--the strongest place in correspondence. Begin with the key sentence, if appropriate; if not, be sure it appears by the end of the first paragraph. Put requests before justifications, answers before explanations, conclusions before discussions, and summaries before details.

2.1.3 Arrange key points. In a complex proposal or a reply to various questions, there may be many key points. In these cases, begin with a general statement of purpose, such as the policy directives. Examples:

a. We inspected the Engineering Department on January 24, 2005, and found its overall performance satisfactory.

- b. We request authorization to hire a full-time clerk typist or to reassign someone from the document management center.
- c. This memorandum summarizes initial plans for reorganizing the Personnel Department.

2.1.4 Be direct. Occasionally, you may delay a main point to soften bad news or to introduce a controversial proposal. In most cases, though, it is best to be direct.

2.1.5 Persuade vs. Inform. When writing to persuade rather than to inform, end strongly with a forecast, appeal, or implication. When feelings are involved, exit gracefully--with an expression of good will. When in doubt, offer assistance and the name and telephone number of a contact.

2.2 Spoken Style

2.2.1 Speak and communicate on paper. Because readers hear writing, the most readable writing sounds like people talking to people. To achieve a spoken style, imagine your reader is sitting across the desk from you. If you are writing to many readers but none in particular, talk to one typical reader. Then write with personal pronouns, everyday words, and other techniques provided in this NPR. Once you have a draft, read it aloud. It should sound like something you might say in person. Whether writing formally or informally, use language you would use in speaking.

2.2.2 Do not use contractions in formal writing.

2.2.3 Speak directly to your readers. Use the imperative mood when preparing administrative documents, especially procedures, "how-to" instructions, and lists of duties. Directness also avoids the passive voice. This style results in shorter, crisper letters and memos. Example:

Sign all copies. Provide the draft by Monday.

2.2.4 Focus on your readers' needs. Analyze your audience in light of your purpose. You should be able to answer these next questions before you begin to write:

- a. What is my purpose?
- b. Who are my readers?
- c. What are their interests?
- d. How much do they know already?
- e. What will make it easy for them to understand or act?

2.3 Compact Writing

2.3.1 Give your ideas no more words than they deserve. Shorten paragraphs to sentences, sentences to clauses, clauses to phrases, phrases to words, words to pictures, or strike the idea entirely. Keep only what contributes to the meaning.

2.3.2 Avoid "it is," unless "it" refers to something mentioned earlier. The use of "it is" constructions tangles sentences, delays meaning, encourages passive verbs, and hides responsibility. Use only natural expressions such as "it is time to" and "it is your job to."

Examples:

- a. Poor: **It is** my understanding that your program covers medical expenses from such injuries.
- b. Better: I understand that your program covers medical expenses from such injuries.
- c. Poor: It is recognized that as the project evolves, there likely will be changes in task definitions and priorities.
- d. Better: We recognize that as the project evolves, task definitions and priorities are likely to change.

2.3.3 Limit the use of "there is" and "there are." Examples:

- a. Poor: There are some deadlines that cannot be changed.
- b. Better: Some deadlines cannot be changed.

2.3.4 Shorten wordy expressions. Instead of adding impressive bulk to writing, wordy expressions clutter it by getting in the way of the words that do the important work.

DO NOT SAY

a number of
at the present time
due to the fact that
for a period of
for the purpose of
in accordance with
in an effort to
in a timely manner
in order to
in the amount of
in the near future
on a quarterly basis
the month of June

SAY

some
now, at present
because
for
for, to
under
to
promptly, on time
to
for
soon
quarterly
June

2.3.5 Use "ly" words sparingly. Let nouns and verbs do the work.

DO NOT SAY

I absolutely believe
we certainly agree

SAY

I believe
we agree

successfully complete

complete

when totally free

when free

2.3.6 Cut doublings.

SAY

pleased **OR** delighted

stimulating **OR** interesting

review **OR** comment on

help **OR** support

2.3.7 Use common, less formal words in most documents.

DO NOT SAY

appreciable

assistance

capability

consequently

demonstrate

endeavor

equitable

expedite

forward

indicate

magnitude

methodology

optimum

preclude

remainder

terminate

timely

utilize

SAY

many

help

can

so

show

try

fair

hurry, speed up

send

show

size

method, way

best, largest

prevent

rest

end

prompt

use

2.3.8 Use short transitions. Save long, bookish ones for variety.

DO NOT SAY (Bookish)

consequently
however
nevertheless
therefore

SAY (Spoken)

so
but
still
so

2.3.9 Avoid legalistic language in nonlegal documents.**DO NOT SAY (Awkward)**

aforementioned
heretofore
herewith is
notwithstanding

SAY (Spoken)

the, that, those
until now
here is
in spite of

2.4 Tone

2.4.1 A writer's attitude toward the subject or readers causes relatively few problems in routine letters. The rules are straightforward.

2.4.2 A neutral tone is preferred. Subordinates may suggest, request, or recommend, but only superiors may direct.

2.4.3 Because much writing is routine, tone sometimes causes problems when the matter is delicate. The more sensitive the reader or issue, the more careful we must be to promote good will. Tactlessness in writing suggests clumsiness in general. When feelings are involved, one misused word can offend the reader.

2.4.4 Be mindful of rubberstamp endings. They do not improve good letters or save bad ones. To the reader whose request has been denied, an offer of further assistance promises further disappointment. As an example, the following closing sentence should be dropped entirely or incorporated with the rest of the letter.

Example: This setback aside, we hope that you will take advantage of other courses available to you.

2.5 Write Positively

2.5.1 As you write, avoid negative language. Unless you have some special reason to caution against something, be positive. If you can accurately express an idea either positively or negatively, express it positively.

2.5.2 The positive statement is usually clearer and briefer. But a negative statement can also be clear. Use it if you are cautioning the reader.

DO NOT SAY (Negative)**SAY (Positive)**

The Administrator may not appoint persons other than those qualified by the Personnel Management Agency.

It will not be ready until Monday.

You failed to sign the other copy.

Opportunity is limited.

The Administrator must appoint a person qualified by the Personnel Management Agency.

It will be ready on Monday.

You need to sign the other copy.

Competition is keen.

2.5.3 Avoid several negatives in one sentence.

DO NOT SAY

A demonstration project will not be approved unless all application requirements are met.

SAY

A demonstration project will be approved only if the applicant meets all requirements.

2.5.4 It is better to express even a negative in positive form.

DO NOT SAY

not honest

did not remember

did not pay any attention to

did not remain at the meeting

did not comply with or failed to comply with

SAY

dishonest

forgot

ignored

left the meeting

violated

2.5.5 "Yes" answers need little explanation. A letter of denial should be explained in enough detail to avoid any hint of a brush off. Most "no" answers need some explanation.

DO NOT SAY (Negative)

Job openings are limited.

Discontinue poor writing.

The cup is half empty.

SAY (Positive)

Competition is keen .

Begin writing well.

The cup is half full.

2.5.6 Use a positive approach to remove some of the sting from the response.
Examples:

a. Poor: Given the limited number of spaces available for the management training program, we must take employees who meet the grade-level requirements before

considering others.

b. Better: Because of the keen competition, we are unable to select you for the management training program at this time. Those who met the grade-level requirements were considered first.

2.5.7 Open a letter by acknowledging the favorable endorsements, and close by thanking the applicant for his or her years of service. This technique helps to soften the bad news.

2.6 Write Short, Disciplined Sentences

2.6.1 Readable sentences are simple, active, affirmative, and declarative. The more a sentence deviates from this structure, the harder the sentence is to understand. Short sentences will not guarantee clarity, but they are usually less confusing than long ones.

2.6.2 State only one main topic in each sentence.

2.6.3 Divide long sentences into two or three short sentences. Average 20 words or less when mixing long and short sentences.

2.6.4 Use parallel structure. In parallel structures, sentences and phrases use the same parts of speech to express different ideas. Arrange two or more equally important ideas so that they appear equal. Parallel structure is especially important when you use a list. Parallelism saves words, clarifies ideas, and provides balance. Examples:

a. In sentences--

(1) By purchasing this equipment, we would cut down on errors, and expenses in the long run would be reduced (not parallel).

(2) By purchasing this equipment, we would reduce errors and expenses (parallel, concise, ideas balanced).

b. In a list--

(1) The duties of the Executive Secretary of the Administrative Committee are as follows (not parallel):

(a) To take minutes of all the meetings. (infinitive phrase)

(b) The Executive Secretary answers all the correspondence. (sentence)

(c) Writing of monthly reports. (gerund phrase)

(2) The duties of the Executive Secretary of the Administrative Committee are as follows (parallel, concise; ideas balanced):

(a) To take minutes of all the meetings.

(b) To answer all the correspondence.

(c) To write the monthly reports.

2.6.5 Remove all unnecessary words. Strive for a simple sentence with a subject and verb. Eliminate unnecessary modifiers.

2.6.6 Place key ideas deliberately. Begin and/or end a sentence with the most important

point because ideas gain emphasis when they appear at either end. To mute an idea, place it in the middle. To improve sentences that mumble, place ideas deliberately, place less emphasis on minor ideas, use more parallelism, and use concise sentences. Examples:

- a. It has been determined that moving the computer, as shown in Enclosure 1, would allow room for another cabinet to be installed. ("moving the computer" muted)
- b. Moving the computer, as shown in Enclosure 1, would allow room for another cabinet. ("moving the computer" stressed)
- c. I would like to congratulate you on your selection as our Employee of the Month for December. ("congratulations" muted)
- d. Congratulations on your selection as our December Employee of the Month. ("congratulations" stressed)

2.6.7 Place minor ideas in secondary clauses; do not make them the main subject of a sentence. Examples:

- a. The revised housing allowance tables, which have been mailed to all pay offices, are effective October 1, 2005. ("date" stressed)
- b. The revised housing allowance tables, which are effective October 1, 2005, have been mailed to all pay offices. ("mailing" stressed)

2.6.8 Be concise. An occasional sentence of six words or fewer grabs the reader's attention. This is an excellent way to make a key point. Example:

I can get more information if each of you gives me less. Here is why. In a week, around 50 staff actions appear in my In box. I could handle that if all I did was work the In box. Yet 70 percent of my time is dedicated to attending briefings. I could handle that dilemma, too--listening to briefings and thinking about staff papers at the same time. However, I do not.

2.6.9 Use questions in your writing. A request gains emphasis when it ends with a question mark. Look for opportunities to reach out to your reader. Examples:

- a. Request this office be notified as to whether the conference has been rescheduled.
- b. Has the conference been rescheduled? (preferred)

2.7 Use Short Paragraphs

2.7.1 Long paragraphs overwhelm ideas and slow the reader's progress. Improve clarity by using short, compact paragraphs. Each paragraph should deal with a single, unified topic. Present lengthy, complex, or technical discussions in a series of related paragraphs or as an appendix.

2.7.2 Use short paragraphs, especially at the beginning of letters. Long first paragraphs discourage reading.

2.7.3 Call attention to lists of items or instructions by displaying them in subparagraphs or bullets. However, do not use so many levels of subparagraphs that the writing becomes difficult to follow.

2.7.4 Occasionally, use a one-sentence paragraph to highlight an important idea.

2.8 Use Personal Pronouns

2.8.1 Personal pronouns are immediate and easy to understand. They help clarify the "who."

2.8.2 Use the following techniques to help retain the reader's interest:

- a. When referring to the Agency, office, or group, use "we," "us," "our," but not "it."
- b. When speaking for yourself, use "I," "me," "my."
- c. When referring to the reader, stated or implied, use "you."

2.9 Use Active Voice

2.9.1 The active voice eliminates confusion by forcing you to name the actor in a sentence. Use a who-does-what order. Example:

Active: The worker inspected the orbiter.

2.9.2 The passive voice makes sentences longer and roundabout. Who is responsible is much less obvious. Passive verbs have a form of the verb "to be" plus the past participle of a main verb. Example:

Passive: The orbiter was inspected by the worker.

2.9.3 Examples of passive verb forms include the following words: am, is, are, was, were, be, and been, plus, a main verb usually ending in "en" or "ed." These include "was received," "is being considered," and "has been selected."

2.9.4 The passive voice reverses the natural, active order of sentences. In the following passive example, the receiver of the action comes before the actor. Using active voice corrects the order. Examples:

- a. Passive: The regulation [receiver] was written [verb] by the drafter [actor].
- b. Active: The drafter [actor] wrote [verb] the regulation [receiver].

2.9.5 Passive constructions are confusing. Active sentences must have actors, but passive ones are complete without them. Examples:

- a. The material will be delivered. By whom?
- b. The start date is to be decided. By whom?
- c. The figures must be approved. By whom?

2.9.6 Putting the actor before the verb forces you to be clear about responsibility. Examples:

- a. The messenger will deliver the material.
- b. The contractor will decide the start date.
- c. The Administrator must approve the figures.

2.9.7. Use the passive voice only when the actor is unknown, unimportant, or obvious. This does not usually apply in administrative writing. Examples:

- a. Small items are often stolen.
- b. The applications have been mailed.

2.10 Use Action Verbs

2.10.1 Action verbs are shorter and more direct and make the sentence clearer.

DO NOT SAY

give consideration to
is applicable to
make payment
give recognition to
as concerned with

SAY

consider
applies
pay
recognize
concerns

2.10.2 Weak writing uses general verbs, which require extra words to complete their meaning.

DO NOT SAY

make preparations for
make use of
is indicative of
undertake an analysis
as stated in

SAY

prepare for
use
shows, indicates
analyze
states

2.11 Use Plain Language Words

2.11.1 Government writing should be dignified, but it should also rely on plain language.

2.11.2 Avoid jargon and pretentious expressions. To make your writing clearer and easier to read and, thus, more effective--use simple words.

DO NOT SAY

construct, fabricate
commence
terminate
utilize
substantial part

SAY

make, initiate
begin
end
use
large part

2.11.3 Omit needless words. Do not use compound prepositions and other wordy expressions when the same meaning can be conveyed with one or two words.

DO NOT SAY

because of the fact that
call your attention to the fact that
for the period of
in many instances
in the nature of
the question as to whether

SAY

since, because
remind you
for
often
like
whether

2.11.4 Avoid redundancies. Do not use word pairs, if the words have the same effect or where the meaning of one includes the other. Word pairs to avoid:

any and all
authorize and direct
cease and desist
each and every
full and complete
order and direct
means and includes
necessary and desirable

2.11.5 Use concrete words. Government writing is often about abstract subjects. But abstract words can be vague and open to different interpretations. Put instructions in simple, concrete words.

DO NOT SAY

vehicles
firearms
aircraft

IF YOU MEAN

automobiles
rifles
helicopters

2.11.6 Do not use words that antagonize. Words can attract or repel readers. Choose words in your writing that do not make the wrong impression or antagonize your readers. Use words to which people react favorably rather than words that they resent.

RATHER THAN THESE WORDS

alibi, blame, waste, allege,
impossible, unfortunate,
wrong

USE WORDS LIKE THESE

achieve, benefit, guarantee,
reasonable, reliable, service,
useful, you, please

2.11.7 Try to avoid gender-specific terminology and gender-specific job titles.

DO NOT SAY

crewman

draftsman

enlisted men and women

fireman

foreman

SAY

crewmember

drafter

enlisted personnel

firefighter

supervisor

2.11.8 Know the difference between "who, which, and that." "Who" and "that" refers to people. Use "who" when referring to an individual. Use "that" when referring to a group. "Which" refers to places, objects, or animals. "That" refers to either people or places, objects, or animals.

2.11.9 Expression of numbers: In general, spell out numbers that are ten or less in a sentence. Refer to The Gregg Reference Manual for exceptions.

2.12 Acronyms

2.12.1 Do not use acronyms more than necessary. Spell out an acronym the first time it appears, followed by the acronym in parentheses unless the acronym is common knowledge; e.g., the use of FAA or NASA in a letter to the National Transportation Safety Board. If the full title is used only once, don't identify the acronym.

2.13 Computer/Internet Words: Usage and Style

2.13.1 Refer to The Gregg Reference Manual before preparing paper or electronic communications containing computer or Internet words.

2.13.2 Use the following styles for expressing Internet words:

- a. Internet and Net: Capitalize the "I" and "N," even within a sentence.
- b. World Wide Web, WWW, Web, or the Web: Capitalize the "W," even within a sentence.
- c. Web site and Web page (two words): Capitalize the "W," even within a sentence.
- d. Home Page (two words): Capitalize when referring to a specific home page or home page title; e.g., NASA Headquarters Home Page; you may want to develop a home page for your audience.
- e. E-mail (electronic mail): Always hyphenated; capitalize the "e" only when used as a heading or at the beginning of a sentence.

2.13.3 Do not use all-capital letters in composing an e-mail message. Generally, it implies that the writer is shouting at the reader.

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